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Trump's Racist Wall: An Icon of His Anti-immigrant Agenda¹

Immigration has always been an emotional issue and caused bitter debates among members of Congress and with the executive. U.S. immigration policy in recent decades has included different approaches such as apprehending undocumented migrants at the border, deporting them (preferably individuals with criminal records), measures to prevent the hiring of undocumented migrants, expanding opportunities for the economy by hiring high- or low-skilled legal immigrants, and accepting refugees for humanitarian reasons, among many other directives. As part of immigration policy, the border

security debate has always been highly divisive and seen different proposals, such as hiring more border patrol agents; building a wall, fences, and barriers; and establishing high-tech surveillance to detect humans and drug traffickers. And many of these approaches have been transformed into policies.

Border security became one of Donald Trump's main targets when he was a presidential candidate in 2015. Since then his position has been to build a wall to more effectively monitor the flow of "illegal" immigrants, who, in his view, constitute a significant national security threat. He has manufactured a crisis along the border based on false premises, which plays very well with his base, and he has used violent rhetoric and promoted hate speech

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against immigrants, especially Mexicans. During his presidential campaign, he stereotyped Mexican migrants as rapists, criminals, and drug traffickers who attempt to cross the border: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best....They’re sending people that have a lot of problems, and they’re bringing those problems to us....They’re bringing drugs....They’re bringing crime.... They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”² These anti-Mexican arguments were widely perceived as xenophobic and racist. Trump’s destructive anti-immigrant and “Mexican-phobic” rhetoric has been the common denominator justifying the highly punitive directives he has established as part of his hardline immigration policy.

During his two years as president, he has signed several executive orders and asked Congress several times for funds to build a 2 000-mile wall along the southern border with Mexico to add to the 653 miles of already-existing fence.³ His request has been consistently rejected by congresspersons, mainly Democrats. Also, he has repeatedly harassed and threatened the Mexican government, demanding it pay for the wall, despite the fact that Mexico has refused multiple times. Trump has reiterated several times that eventually Mexico is going to pay for it through the revised NAFTA, which has been renamed as the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement, or even by taxing remittances.

Since 2006, the government has built about 700 miles of walls and fences on federal land where the terrain does not provide a natural barrier, mainly concentrated in highly populated areas. Drones, cameras, and other surveillance tools reinforce the physical wall, but Trump is demanding “a long and beautiful wall,” a sick fixation. Through 25 official entry points, approximately one million people cross the border each day, making it one of the most dynamic and heavily traveled in the world. Crucial economic ties depend on important bilateral cooperation to move goods and control the entrance of people, an intense interaction that has been under threat since the

beginning of the Trump administration. Building an extension of the wall is not a solution in terms of national security, but it has become an icon of Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric. Specialists in the issue, Democrats, and many Republicans in Congress have argued that its construction, besides being extremely expensive, would divert—rather than prevent—unauthorized flows as has happened during the last decades. Also, its construction represents a very hefty environmental cost as well as a negative impact on bi-national communities, dividing “us” from “them,” and on private property rights, since only 30 percent of the land is owned by the federal government. Even some hard-liners in the extremist, anti-immigrant movement do not regard the wall as their highest priority. Democrats and Republicans agree that there is need for more staff, better technology, and some fencing, as well as more humane asylum policies, among many other measures. However, Trump’s aggressive wall obsession has jeopardized dialogue among them.

The wall has proved ineffective since almost half of the unauthorized migrants living in the United States did not enter clandestinely through the border, but on visas: an estimated 42 percent of the undocumented population entered the country with some type of visa. These people later exceeded their allowed time of stay, becoming visa abusers or “overstayers,” something Trump seems to overlook. Also, the president issued another executive action to hire 5 000 additional border patrol agents, a 25-percent increase to the current 19 828. Instead, a large number of their staff has left the service, and at the end of 2018, they still had many vacancies.

Trump also seems to be unaware that the net flow of undocumented Mexican migrants has dropped substantially since the 2008 economic crisis. There were 10.7 million unauthorized immigrants living in the U.S. in 2016, down from a peak of 12.2 million in 2007. Even though Mexicans have long been the largest group among unauthorized migrants (6.9 million in 2007, 57 percent of the total), their number has decreased to 5.6 million in 2017

(51 percent of the total). That is to say, many fewer new Mexican migrants arrive and more have been apprehended, deported, or voluntarily returned, reaching an equilibrium: the “zero net migration” point. Due to the extreme reinforcement at the border and also in the interior, increasingly, unauthorized immigrants are likely to be long-term U.S. residents: two-thirds of adult undocumented immigrants have lived in the country for more than 10 years, ending the previous temporary migration pattern. By contrast, the number of unauthorized immigrants from Central America has increased by 375 000 over the same 2007-2016 period.⁴ Therefore, those who would get rich from building the wall, in addition to construction companies, are mainly the human smugglers or traffickers who have substantially increased their profits by bringing undocumented immigrants into the U.S.⁵

Initially, Trump asked Congress to approve US\$18 billion in additional funding to start construction work. The Omnibus Spending Bill of 2018 assigned no funds for the wall, but only for new technologies and repair of the existing barriers, explicitly prohibiting the building of a concrete wall. Trump’s fixation with building a wall demanded Congress authorize US\$5.1 billion in December 2018, but Democrats have offered US\$1.3 billion to that end. His discontent has grown significantly, and in reaction Trump has launched the third partial shutdown during his presidency, rejecting a deal offered by members of both parties to open up the government. This is the longest funding lapse in modern history, surpassing a 21-day record set during the Clinton administration. Given Trump’s anti-immigrant and xenophobic position, so far, the border wall has not been negotiable since it is based on the racist ideology supported by his entire base, white supremacists, and nationalists who have not abandoned him. It is important to mention that in all shutdowns, Democrats have offered support for the construction of the wall and the appointment of more border agents mainly in exchange for a solution for the Dreamers, but also for foreigners with Temporary Protected Status (TPS), an initiative that

has been consistently rejected by Trump and hard-liner Republicans. This situation has left 800 000 federal employees in limbo. Trump is constantly using any public ceremony to aggressively denounce Democrats for refusing to build the wall and frequently threatens to close the border and cut off aid to Central America and Mexico if Congress continues to deny the funds demanded.

Trump’s anger against “illegals” intensified significantly due to the arrival of the “caravan” from Central America. Several hundred asylum seekers started crossing through Mexico in April 2018, and Trump accused the Mexican government of not doing anything to stop them from reaching the U.S. border, once again threatening to withdraw from NAFTA if Mexico did not act. As an answer to this “invasion” and in the midst of the mid-term elections, Trump flashily dispatched 5 200 troops to the U.S.-Mexico border, the largest deployment in recent years, to address what he perceives as a “crisis” along the border until the wall is built. Governors of border states agreed to guard the border to differing degrees. Simultaneously, Trump adopted an immoral “zero tolerance policy,” whose main purpose was to separate parents from their children when crossing the border “illegally” into the United States. Even though the law allows families who cross “illegally” to remain together while their case is decided, approximately 2600 children were forcibly separated from their parents under Trump’s policy until June 2018.⁶ While parents were prosecuted, children were placed in the custody of the Health and Human Services Department. Trump was forced to reverse this highly controversial policy, signing an executive order amid a national and international outcry demanding that families remain together. As part of his anti-immigrant agenda, Trump instructed government officials to keep up with the “zero-tolerance” policy, prosecuting all immigrants who enter the U.S. illegally and declaring that people who crossed the border not at official U.S. ports of entry would be ineligible for asylum; but this was almost immediately blocked by a federal judge in California. Fortunately, the

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Trump administration has faced a number of setbacks by local and federal courts in response to immigration initiatives and executive orders that have been part of his toughening migration policy. In fact, there has been an important decrease in asylum admissions and a marked increase in cases in which border agents have rejected applicants at the border using tactics outside the law as well as lowering the number of interviews per day to stall. During FY2018, 22 491 refugees were admitted, the lowest number since the 1980s. This heartless policy is an absolute violation of human rights that should be taken into consideration by Congress members and multilateral institutions, who should push to end Trump's perverse, harmful actions.

In order to justify the wall, Trump falsely claims that apprehensions at the border have grown significantly. According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection statistics, border apprehensions grew only 14 percent, from 310 531 in 2017 (the lowest percentage since 1971) to 361 993, in 2018, but were down from 2016's 415 816. I believe that this was the result of the fear encouraged by Trump's aggressive rhetoric since the beginning of his presidency. Fewer Mexicans and an increasing number of Central Americans are apprehended at the border individually and as families (33 percent of the total).

Trump's proposal to return undocumented migrants apprehended at the border to the place where they entered, regardless of their country of origin, even while awaiting legal proceedings in the United States, is a highly sensitive issue. The former Peña Nieto administration repeatedly stated that Mexico will not admit people of other nationalities if the United States tries to send them back to the Mexican side of the border. From my point of view, this policy is an aggression against Mexico and constitutes another point of tension. During the Peña Nieto administration, Mexico stepped up enforcement efforts along its southern border for the benefit of the U.S. government, reaching levels not seen in more than a decade.⁷

At a time when some areas of Mexico's northern border have become increasingly problematic and conflictive, since many Central Americans and other nationals are waiting either to enter U.S. territory or have been returned, the Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) government has taken another attitude, adapting detention centers, mainly in Tijuana, for the refugee petitioners, who could spend months or years in quite an insecure situation. AMLO is playing the role of a "safe third-country" without having signed a bilateral agreement, demonstrating his total lack of knowledge or his anti-institutional stance. He has adopted a non-confrontational position *vis-à-vis* the Trump administration, and hopefully the bilateral proposal to invest funds in impoverished areas of Central America and southern Mexico so that people do not feel forced to leave, will benefit the region's economic development. **NMM**

Notes

- 1 This article is based on a longer version, found at <http://www.revisistanorteamerica.unam.mx/index.php/nam/article/view/335/376>.
- 2 Michelle Mark, "Trump Just Referred to One of His Most Infamous Campaign Comments: Calling Mexicans 'Rapists,'" *Business Insider*, April 5, 2018, <http://www.businessinsider.com/trump-mexicans-rapists-remark-reference-2018-4>.
- 3 On January 25, 2017, Trump issued the Border Security and Immigration Enforcement *Improvements* executive order to reinforce the border. The same day he signed another executive order to reinforce deportations: *Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the US* (EO).
- 4 According to the Pew Hispanic Center (PEW), 1.85 million Central American unauthorized immigrants in 2016 came from the three Northern Triangle nations (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador).
- 5 In November 2016, smugglers were charging approximately US\$3 500 per crossing. According to the Department of Homeland Security, the cost has increased to anywhere from US\$9 200 to US\$12 500 to travel from Central America.
- 6 In November 2018, nearly 150 children remained separated from their relatives. A record 14 000 migrant children, the vast majority unaccompanied minors, are now in the custody of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which is responsible for the facilities where child migrants, including those separated from their families, are being held. Michelle Mittelstadt, "Top 10 of 2018— Issue #4: Children on the Frontlines," Migration Policy Institute, Washington, D.C., December 18, 2018, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/top-10-2018-issue-no-4-children-frontlines>.
- 7 It has been calculated that the flow of undocumented crossings—counting crossings, not people—from Central America to the United States through Mexico ranges between 350 000 to 400 000. Sandra Dibble, "Mexico Reshaping Approach to Central American Migrants As Caravans Push North," *The San Diego Union Tribune*, November 11, 2018, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/sd-me-mexico-immigration-20181111-story.html>.